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Of Cloak and Scholar

It is not immoral and is certainly useful for the Central Intelligence Agency to seek the advice of American scholars and even to subsidize some research. The important thing, for academe, is that its associations be openly acknowledged.

Serious trouble arises when the C.I.A.'s involvement in a scholarly endeavor is kept secret, even from the participants and beneficiaries. A conspicuous instance occurred at Harvard last fall, when the C.I.A. covertly underwrote a conference on Islamic fundamentalism. The agency's hand was exposed by the student newspaper, and the university correctly concluded that its rules were violated because the conferees did not know who was paying their bills.

To placate the critics, the C.I.A. now says it will acknowledge its interest unless a scholar requests secrecy or the agency determines that disclosure "would prove damaging to the United States." That at least concedes the seriousness of the problem. But a moment's thought shows the inadequacy of a formula that will only deepen the suspicions and fears it is meant to dispel.

The escape hatches puncture the credibility of the C.I.A.'s avowals of candor. Given its reflexive passion for secrecy, the agency can be counted on to scent damage in the most innocuous information. And if scholars have the option of concealment, some can be counted on to employ it in precisely those touchy areas where exposure would be most embarrassing.

Yet no secrets are really safe on campus. A case in point is The Harvard Crimson's latest disclosure — that the C.I.A. apparently underwrote research on an article entitled "Dead Dictators and Rioting Mobs." It is just the kind of subject on which an author might want to hide the agency's provenance.

The C.I.A. is forbidden by its charter from covertly attempting to influence domestic opinion. This prohibition is meant to protect the integrity of American democracy — and sometimes the very lives of American scholars who must never be confused with spies and agents abroad. For both reasons, the agency should permit disclosure in every case, and universities should insist on it.